

Remarks on the Protection of Bristol Bay and National Conservation Efforts
May 11, 2023

The President. Well, I tell you what—looking at the guys up front here, having to put on ties when you're—on a school day—[*laughter*]*—that's a hard thing to do. And all you lovely young ladies, it's—you're not hot, are you?*

Audience member. It's really a hot one.

The President. [*Laughter*] Well, I will try to make this mercifully short. But I think it's pretty important.

Thank you, Alannah, for the introduction and for all the work you did on behalf of Bristol Bay, and all of you here. And thank everyone joining us today.

The Second Gentleman is here, along with his parents Mike and Barbara. As they say in Southern Delaware, you done good raising that boy. [*Laughter*] And thank you.

And Deb Haaland, who is the Secretary of Interior, a true champion of conservation. Michael Regan, who's done a terrific job as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

And just this morning he announced a new proposal to cut carbon pollution from coal- and gas-fired power plants. This announcement kicks off a public commitment to engage with labor and industry and environmentalists and other experts to make sure we make a major step forward in the climate crisis, protecting public health.

We're also joined by Tribal leaders and conservation advocates and representatives of the business community who worked together for decades to achieve something momentous for the people of Alaska, for all Americans: the protection of Bristol Bay.

And, folks, we're here to celebrate that achievement as part of my administration's land and water conservation agenda, the most ambitious in American history. Bristol Bay is an extraordinary place unlike anywhere in the world. Six rivers meet there, traveling through 40,000 miles of tundra, wetlands, and lakes, collecting freshwater and sediment along the way from some of the most pristine land on the entire planet. And that's not hyperbole.

That freshwater empties into Bristol Bay, where every year tens of millions of salmon return, making this the largest sockeye salmon fishery on all the Earth. Folks, even in this age of climate change, the fish runs at Bristol Bay are breaking records. It's a marvel. And—oh, it really is, when you think about it—at least I—I was worried about this 10 years ago.

The Alaska Native people have rallied and relied on this fishery for millennia. Today, Bristol Bay supplies nearly half of the world's wild sockeye salmon. And it supports 1,000—or 15,000 jobs—American jobs in fishing, processing, and tourism. The economic value is estimated to be \$2.2 billion.

This amazing thing about resources like this: If you take care of it, it can go on forever. But it's impossible to put an economic price on that. And the—you know, the opposite is true as well. Once a resource like this is harmed or destroyed, it may be impossible to bring it back again.

That's why, decades ago, when mining companies made plans to create one of the largest open-pit gold and copper mines in North America right near the headwaters of Bristol Bay, folks were alarmed, including me.

The mine—that mine would have destroyed 100 miles of streams and nearly 3,000 acres of wetlands and open water that are critical to the salmon breeding. And it would have created billions of tons of toxic and dangerous waste. All that waste would have been stored behind a massive dam in perpetuity, forever.

But Bristol Bay is a region prone to earthquakes, which could destroy that dam. It gets tremendous amounts of rain and snow, which would cause toxic waste to pour over the sides of the dam. And if the dam failed, the waste would be poured into the headwaters of Bristol Bay, and that would be a true calamity.

Other mines like this in other parts of America, which are built much—in much drier climates where consequences of an engineering failure would not have been as severe. But not in Bristol Bay.

So it was critical—critical—to determine whether this mine could be safely built in a way that guaranteed Bristol Bay would not be harmed. As the years went by, engineers and scientists worked on the problem. And it became clear that there was no way—no way—to do this safely.

And the Tribal leaders, commercial fishermen, hunters, anglers, environmental advocates worked together to protect this ecosystem. Ultimately, the matter went to the Federal Government.

As a candidate for President, I promised you that I would listen to the scientists and concluded a rigorous, fast—fact-based review of all of it; and to the Tribal leaders, whose firsthand knowledge had been gathered over generations; and to the fishermen whose livelihood depended on the bay. And that's exactly what I did.

In the end, we used our authority under the Clean Water Act to ban the disposal of mine waste in Bristol Bay watershed. Period. That means—[*applause*]. And that means the mine will not be built.

And for many of you, this has been a—the fight of your lifetime. I'm sure along the way you were told this mine was inevitable, that you should just accept it, that you should give up. But you didn't.

And thanks to the priceless resource that is protected for future generations who depends on it and is required and is a consequence of all of you. To everyone who had a role in saving Bristol Bay, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Folks, Bristol Bay is an example of my administration's commitment to conservation. In my first week in office, I issued an Executive order establishing the first-ever national conservation goal. I called it "America the Beautiful," and it's a nationwide campaign to protect and conserve, by 2030, at least 30 percent of the lands and waters that support and sustain this Nation.

We're making strong progress toward that goal. In fact, in just my first year in office, I protected more lands and waters than any President since John F. Kennedy. I signed the bipartisan infrastructure law and the Inflation Reduction Act. That's the largest investments in climate, environmental justice, and conservation ever, anywhere, period. And look, with—[*applause*]. It wouldn't have happened without you.

Over the past 2 years, these investments have helped protect our iconic outdoor spaces, preserve historic sites, and make our Nation more resilient to the devastating impacts of climate change. In Alaska, we protected more than 9 million acres of the Tongass National Forest, the largest temperate rainforest in the world. I've visited it. It's incredible.

We restored protections and status that previous administrations rolled back for three national monuments: Bears Ears; Grand Staircase-Escalante; North East Canyon and the Seamounts Marine National Monument.

And by the way, I remember a little girl came up to me at a function here, and she had drawn this bear with—[*inaudible*]. She said, "Can you take care of the Bears Ears?" [*Laughter*] And I looked at her, I'm thinking: "Umm. Uhh, honey"—she said, "You know, the Bears Ears." [*Laughter*] I said, "Oh, you mean the park!" She said: "Yeah, they're going to take away the Bears Ears. You got to protect it." [*Laughter*]

Well, it shows as every generation, man.

Last year, I used my authority under the Antiquities Act to add Camp Hale Continental Divide in Colorado to the list of National Monuments. And it's magnificent.

And 2 months ago, I added two more: Spirit Mountain in Nevada, which ties together one of the longest and largest contiguous wildlife corridors in the United States and sacred lands that are central to the creation story of so many Tribes who have been there since time immemorial; and the Castner Range in Texas, another place of incredible beauty, which tells the story of Tribal Nations who lived there and the numbers of Armed Forces who were trained there.

Look, folks, at my direction, the Secretary of Commerce has begun to proceed on designating 770,000 square miles—square miles—of the Pacific Ocean, southwest of Hawaii, as a new national marine sanctuary. That's bigger than Alaska and California combined. Combined. It will be the largest—[*applause*]. It will be the largest ocean area on the planet with the highest level of protection.

And I declared the entire U.S. Arctic Ocean off-limits to new oil and gas development. Period. And we began the process to protect more than 13 million acres—13 million acres of significant natural and historic value in the Alaska National Petroleum Reserve.

And I've protected the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness—surrounding wetlands in Minnesota. Look, that's the most heavily visited wildlife area in the Nation.

All this matters. When we conserve our country's national gifts, we're not only protecting the livelihoods of people who depend on them, like commercial fishermen, family farms, outdoor recreation businesses, rural communities that welcome visitors across the country, we're also protecting what I consider to be—and I mean this sincerely—the heart and the soul of our Nation—national pride.

Our country's natural resources define our identity as a nation. They're the birthright we pass down from generation to generation. They literally unite us. That's why our conservation work, in my view, is so important. It provides a bridge to our past and to our future, not just for today, but for all ages.

Folks, now, I wish I could say everyone agreed. There was a time when some of the Nation's most dedicated conservationists were on the other party. But the extreme MAGA Republicans have taken control of the House of Representatives. And they're holding our economy hostage by threatening to default on our national debt, a debt we've already incurred over 200 years, unless we give into the threats and their demands.

Here's what the Speaker put forward in the Republican proposal. He wants to cut 22 percent of everything that isn't defense spending, Social Security, or Medicare, which I basically never thought would happen—negotiated they wouldn't touch in the State of the Union message. [*Laughter*] Anyway.

Everything else gets cut 22 percent. That means thousands of wetland—wildland firefighters would stop getting paid at a time when wildfires are frequent and destructive. I've flown over more wildfires since I've been President than—and burned to the ground—land burned to the ground than the entire State of Maryland.

It means thousands of National Parks employees, including park rangers, would face losing their jobs. It means laying off hundreds of workers who regulate water quality across our Nation, making sure water—the water your kids drink is safe. And it means slashing resources and—for monitoring pollution, which would let polluters get away with and expose vulnerable communities to dirty air and water.

Folks, we can't let that happen. We can't let that happen.

Let me close with this. In just a few weeks, on June the 1st, the commercial salmon season will begin in Bristol Bay. As one fisherman up there said, "It's like Christmas morning." [Laughter] It's like Christmas morning. [Laughter]

They'll head out on the water at dawn, cast their nets, and fish the most abundant wild salmon on the planet, just like fishermen have done for generations, just like they will do for generations to come, thanks to all of you. I share with all of you an enduring reverence for the power and the promise of this country's extraordinary natural wonders.

So let's keep it going. Let's keep the faith. Every time I'd walk out of my grandpop's house, he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith." And my grandmother: "No, Joey. Spread it." Let's spread the faith.

We're the United States of America. There's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity if we work together. Nothing.

So God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:41 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Alannah Hurley, executive director, United Tribes of Bristol Bay; Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris, and his parents Mike and Barbara Emhoff; and Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin O. McCarthy.

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